

The Messenger and Brothers: The elephant in the room

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The Messenger directed by Oren Moverman, screenplay by Moverman and Alessandro Camon; Brothers directed by Jim Sheridan, screenplay by David Benioff, based on the film Brødre by Susanne Bier

Every war has certain common features: the terror of battle, the tragedy of death and injury, heights of cowardice and bravery. In every conflict there are those who fall victim and those who survive, and families of both victims and survivors. And there are also primarily organizational or technical issues that are universal to war, whether “just” or “unjust”: the transportation and mobilization of troops, the treatment of the wounded, and so forth.

However, for both art and politics, the distinguishing, *qualitative* characteristics of a given war are essential (or ought to be) to an understanding of what’s important or striking about the conduct of a soldier on or returning from the battlefield. The driving forces of a war for these spheres are not of secondary importance, luxury items. For example, the gulf—or not—between the claims made about why people are being sent off to the frontline and what the war is *really about* may have a massive bearing on the responses and behavior of soldiers, and, later, veterans, psychologically and otherwise.

In the American Civil War, for instance, Union soldiers endured unimaginable hardships, blunders from their leadership, and far worse physical conditions than today’s military forces. However, the most conscious troops knew what they were fighting for, and stuck it out. There was a more or less one-to-one relation between what they *thought* they were doing and what they were *actually* doing.

Furthermore, it was a fighting force not only conscious of the cause, but in large numbers greatly inspired by it. Under these circumstances, making sacrifices comes more organically, with injury and death not as catastrophic or at least as incomprehensible. (Of course, even in such a case, there is no need to downplay the horror of war or its traumatic psychic consequences, as Stephen Crane demonstrated in *The Red Badge of Courage*.)

Not so today. In fact, the situation is nearly the polar opposite. The US Army has the latest technology. As the ruling elite is so fond of reminding everyone, the US is the world’s *only* military superpower. The country also has the best medical resources to treat its wounded, although the military is routinely delinquent in the care of its veterans.

But what does the current American soldier see? Invasions and occupations of poor, oppressed countries. Acts of brutality that inevitably widen in scope and frequency. One neo-colonial enterprise after another being conducted with intense violence in which the young and immature are used as cannon fodder by a ruthless, callous political class that lies and manipulates. Often the military’s recruits come from backward, uneducated sections of the youth who are lifted out of small-town America and thrust into alien territory confronting hostile populations, with predictably disastrous results.

How could a serious artist not take these issues into account, for example, when dealing with the reactions of soldiers during and after their combat experiences in the Iraq and Afghanistan theaters? Common sense suggests that if one intends to discuss what men and women do after leaving a war zone, one has to reckon with the character of the war they were fighting. It would almost seem self-evident. But with a few honorable exceptions, this is not what’s done in the American cinema today.

Since this failure appears to fly in the face of logic, one has to conclude that behind the problem lie intense pressures weighing down on the artist, as well as problems of aesthetic perspective. Speaking concretely, in the US at present the government, the Pentagon and the media make a concerted effort to intimidate filmmakers and the film industry. Anyone who dares step out of line is “unpatriotic” and “un-American.” On top of this the artist is told he or she has to worry about creating a product that will be “box office poison.”

That the willingness to stick one’s neck out and tell the truth is alien at the moment to Hollywood and independent cinema alike is a social and cultural problem. Artists contort themselves to avoid saying the obvious.

At some level, however, the men and women whose lives are ruined by fighting in these wars know something is not right, something is foul. Something horrible is going on, something distrusted at home and hated in the region, something wildly at variance with the “official story.” And this has deep-going consequences, that penetrate every aspect of life for those who have been there, their families and even their communities.

Given the respective filmmakers’ refusal to deal with the nature of the current conflicts, it comes as no surprise that *The Messenger* and the distasteful *Brothers* fail to dramatize in any significant depth the situation of the returning soldier.

Israeli-American screenwriter Oren Moverman makes his

editorial debut in *The Messenger*. Officer Will Montgomery (Ben Foster), recently back from a tour in Iraq, is assigned to the Army's casualty notification service for his time remaining in the military. He is paired with fellow officer Tony Stone (Woody Harrelson), a veteran at being the bearer of bad news to the families of fallen soldiers.

"No such thing as a satisfied customer," says Stone, a square-jawed alcoholic who is more off the wagon than on. Despite apparently being cavalier about his job, he is an insecure wreck incapable of dealing with women as anything other than sex objects.

The more sensitive Will, who suffers from flashbacks and post-combat stress, had given his long-time girlfriend Kelly (Jena Malone) permission to opt out of the relationship while he was away. Though she greets him with flowers and love-making upon his arrival home, she is now engaged to another man. In his dingy apartment, Will struggles mightily with his demons.

Two men in uniform arriving at a military family's doorstep is a visitation by the Angel of Death, so the pair have no script appropriate for every occasion. Tony and Will make six calls in the course of the film, each one eliciting a different reaction from the generally lower middle class or poor family members. A quasi-voyeuristic, strained element attaches to these scenes as the film generally stays away from any encounter with the bereaved.

There is one exception: the war widow Olivia (Samantha Morton), who turns the table on the team with "I know this can't be easy for you." Will takes an interest in her. Olivia's story is the most revealing about the plight of the veteran and his or her family, and Morton brings a great deal emotionally to the table.

About her husband she says: "Staying home was not an option [for him]—I miss the man he was a long time ago." She tells of opening a closet, where there was a shirt hanging that "smelled of rage and fear—smelled of the man he had become." Seeing army recruiters accosting young people in a mall, Olivia reacts with hostility, creating one of the film's strongest anti-military moments.

Another more understated one takes place in a bar where a celebration for a returning soldier is under way. At first, the young veteran tries to impress his audience by ridiculing "Haji-Wan Kenobi." But outside the bar with Will, he is at loose ends, a tormented soul suspended between two worlds. Says Will sadly, "It's like coming back from another planet."

The Messenger is well-acted. The performers clearly wanted to say something. The filmmaker, a veteran of the Israeli army, emigrated to the US after completing his military service, which he found disillusioning.

Moverman claims his film is non-partisan about the war. "The bottom line is that war is not a good thing," said the director in an interview. "But it [the film] takes no point of view in terms of this particular war." Shamefully, he sent the script to the Defense Department's liaison office in Hollywood, which was approving.

Less honest and conscientious is *Brothers*, directed by veteran Irish filmmaker Jim Sheridan (*My Left Foot*, *In the Name of the Father*, *In America*). The "brothers" in question are Tommy (Jake Gyllenhaal) and Sam (Tobey Maguire). Shortly before Sam ships out for his fourth tour of duty in Afghanistan, he picks up Tommy

from a stint in prison.

Sam is a loving husband to wife Grace (Natalie Portman) and father to two adorable girls (adorable young girls also featured prominently in Sheridan's *In America*). He is the favored son of Hank (Sam Shepard), a Vietnam vet who has a drinking problem that is never openly acknowledged. By contrast, Tommy is shiftless and suffers from chronic patriarchal disapproval.

Sam has taught his kids that the "ones with the beards" are "the bad guys." Being back in Afghanistan "almost feels like home," until he gets shot down in a helicopter and is reported dead by the military. Tommy tries to fill the void in Sam's family, becoming close to Grace and the girls, maturing in the process.

In fact, Sam is alive and comes home after being brutally tortured by the "Taliban," who force him to carry out an atrocity in order to obtain his freedom. The return is a nightmare all around.

Brothers is a film that largely stands reality on its head. According to its logic, neither the US invasion of Afghanistan nor the horrors rained down upon its population are primarily responsible for Sam's state of mind. No, the dark-skinned, sinister, and bearded evil-doers are the perpetrators of crimes against the American forces. The film is barely watchable, especially in light of the recurring massacres of civilians carried out by US troops, and those on the horizon, as the peace-prize-winning Obama increases troop levels in the devastated country.

As a result, the relationships in the movie take on an unreal character. Only the little girls elicit sympathy, and even then, within definite limits, as their connection is none-too-subtly meant to reproduce the dynamic that existed between Tommy and Sam when they were growing up. Portman is mostly relegated to the status of eye-candy. Nothing can salvage a film based on such a misbegotten premise.



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